

## Asceticism and monasticism, I: Eastern

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The emergence of monasticism in the East, its rapid development in the fourth and fifth centuries and its establishment as a major institution in Christianity are among the most significant phenomena in the history of Christianity. Although asceticism as such has deep roots in ancient society, both in the various religious traditions of the Eastern Mediterranean and in the Greek philosophical tradition, the emergence of monasticism constitutes a strikingly rapid and radical change of social, political and religious culture. Almost totally absent in our sources up to the mid-fourth century, monasticism becomes a major concern in Christian literature by the end of the century. What was a new phenomenon in the early fourth century was by the early fifth century already a major force (as well as a major problem!) for the church. From the late fourth century onwards, issues related to monasticism are on the agenda at almost every council in the East, and monks can be seen as playing a pivotal role within all the important conflicts of the church in the East during this period.

Previous scholarly attempts to identify a single source for, and to trace a unified development of, Eastern monasticism have met with a conspicuous lack of success. In its early formation, monasticism took inspiration from a number of traditions – particularly from scripture,<sup>1</sup> but from other sources as well, Christian and non-Christian – and throughout the period under consideration the monastic impulse found expression in numerous varieties ranging from hermits to large-scale monasteries, from itinerant groups of preachers to recluses strictly enclosed in cells, from unwashed stylites to aristocratic households. The development of the monastic tradition was, moreover, regionally distinct, depending on geographical, social, political and religious factors. In

<sup>1</sup> The account of the first Christian community in Jerusalem (Acts 4) is taken as programmatic for monastic life by many authors and may account for the spontaneous development of broadly similar forms of behaviour in different areas. See, e.g., A. Vööbus, *History of asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, 1: 147; L. Verheijen, *Saint Augustine's monasticism*.

this chapter, a discussion of some general characteristic features will precede a typological description of the main varieties and a sketch of the tradition's emergence in the five major areas, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor and Constantinople.

### Characteristics

The first question to be asked is, what is meant by monasticism? The word *monachos* as a social designation turns up for the first time in Egyptian documentary papyri during 323 AD.<sup>2</sup> Although absent from the Septuagint, the word occurs in other Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible for *yehidim* in Psalm 68.7, as well as in second-century texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Dialogue of the Saviour* from the Nag Hammadi Library. The word designates a person who is single-minded, that is, someone who is celibate and devoted to a spiritual life. The first specific depictions of Christian ascetics as monks are found in Eusebius (c. 260–340) and Athanasius (c. 296–373).<sup>3</sup> The use of *monachos* in the papyri, where it is often combined with other more specialised terms such as *parthenos*, *apotaktikos*, *monazontos* and *anachoretēs*, indicates that it gradually became the standard general term for a variety of ascetic lifestyles. The emergence and rapid spread of a more unified terminology was most probably prompted by a need in the Constantinian period for a stricter differentiation between the 'ordinary' Christian on one hand and all ascetics on the other; another index of this differentiation is the contemporary emphasis on physical separation, as we shall see. In this way, the term *monachos* first came to embrace many approaches to Christian spiritual life and then its meaning was restricted to specific accepted forms of ascetic life. This process is evident in the use of the common expression 'pseudo-monks'. Occurring regularly from the late fourth century, it shows not only that 'monk' was universally considered a positive term, but also that the term could be used even to characterise individuals who varied from the norm.

Earlier scholarly attempts to define monasticism with reference to a complete detachment from society and the creation of a *Sonderwelt* are problematic. These attempts drew heavily on later literary descriptions of early Egyptian monks (not least by Latin authors such as Jerome and Cassian, whose works will be discussed below), which are highly idealised and not well supported by the historical sources. For example, in the earliest documents, we find monks

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Choat, 'The development and the usage of terms for "monks"'.  
<sup>3</sup> On the history of the terminology see Françoise-E. Morard, 'Monachos, moine', and Choat, 'The development and usage of terms for "monk"'.

living in the cities and towns; there is also evidence for strong economic and social interaction between rural monks and the towns.<sup>4</sup> The great recorded variety of monastic lifestyles makes it difficult to specify formal criteria for monasticism other than a celibate life, an emphasis on ascetic practice and a strong sense of independence in relation to society – and often in relation to church institutions as well.

All the varieties of monastic life exhibit an emphasis on renunciation of traditional forms of social life (including marriage, private wealth and secular responsibilities), deprivation of bodily needs and concentration on spiritual goals. In one way or another, all of them also link this to a zeal for communion with God through Christ and interpret this communion in eschatological terms. The basic ideal is therefore freedom, that is, liberation from social as well as bodily concerns in the pursuit of a new status characterised by detachment, peace and invulnerability. These basic ascetic ideas can be found already in the earliest strata of Christian tradition as a practical expression of eschatological ideas, as well as in several of the philosophical traditions of antiquity in which they are linked to a quest for unity and simplicity in the face of diversity and disorder. In Manichaean as well as in the heterodox Jewish and Christian literature that is usually labelled Gnostic, the same ideals are combined with strongly dualistic views about the necessity of liberating the spirit from the body. The ascetic framework and the ascetic reading of the scriptures is thus not an invention of emerging monasticism; rather, it is deeply rooted and universally attested in the church from the apostolic age, as indeed in late ancient society generally.

In addition to Christian ascetic practices, early monasticism drew heavily upon the Greek philosophical tradition. Philosophy was primarily understood as the pursuit and teaching of the perfect way of life, the precondition for pure knowledge and illumination by the divine. A philosophical life was thus a life characterised not only by intellectual activity but also by detachment from social and political affairs and freedom from concern for wealth or bodily pleasure.<sup>5</sup> The first Christian writers to present a philosophical and theological setting for the ascetic ideals were Clement of Alexandria and Origen, who were both to have a great impact on the ideas of the earliest monastic leaders, especially in Egypt. Clement's basically Stoic understanding of ethics (with its emphasis on virtues and passions), as well as his emphasis on esoteric

4 The evidence for Egypt is collected in Ewa Wipszycka, 'Le monachisme égyptien et les villes', and for Syria and Asia Minor in Daniel Caner, *Wandering, begging monks*.

5 For ancient philosophy as a main influence on the development of monasticism see Pierre Hadot, *Exercises spirituels*.

knowledge or *gnosis*, is fundamental for both Anthony the Great and Evagrius. The influence of Origen, who was widely read in the early Egyptian monastic tradition, is a matter of debate among scholars, but it is clearly visible in basic cosmological ideas about man, angels and demons, as well as in the understanding of prayer, church and scripture.<sup>6</sup> A number of other texts coming out of the Alexandrian theological tradition, such as the 'Sentences of Sextus' or 'Teachings of Silvanus' in the Nag Hammadi corpus, have close parallels in early monastic literature. They show that we must look at the intellectual climate of early monasticism as part of a more general Greek educational and philosophical context. Even in the earliest literary sources, monks are already regarded as persons pursuing a philosophical life, and there are numerous descriptions of monks as the successors to (no less than competitors of) the philosophers. Parallels and interaction between Christian monastic literature and pagan philosophical literature are also found and many early monastic texts are based on the models used in classical rhetorical education. For example, the *Apophthegmata patrum*, or 'Sayings of the desert fathers', as well as the writings of Evagrius, have parallels in collections of aphorisms, as well as in the exercises of rhetorical education. The *Life of Anthony* is partly modelled upon a *Life of Pythagoras*,<sup>7</sup> and the so-called 'Paraenesis of Anthony' is a lightly Christianised Stoic tractate circulating under the name of Anthony the Great.

Although deeply formed by Greek cultural traditions, early monasticism also drew upon non-Greek religious traditions. For the emergence of Syrian monasticism, the apocalyptic and Gnostic literature of Jewish background is quite significant. Here the most important image is not the school with its teacher, but the apostle and missionary, the travelling preacher bringing the message to ever new audiences. As a monk the messenger not only preaches about the world to come, but is a living sign of it, and the monastic communities are the visible results of the preaching. The religious traditions of Egypt and Syria have also left their marks on emerging monasticism. Not only do we find in Egyptian monastic material a clear link to Egyptian wisdom traditions, but it is also likely that the emphasis upon seclusion and retreat to tombs in

<sup>6</sup> For the debate see Samuel Rubenson, 'Origen in the Egyptian monastic tradition'. Origen's influence on the main theoretician of early monasticism, Evagrius of Pontus (c. 345–99), is well documented in all works on Evagrius.

<sup>7</sup> Except for the *Life of Anthony* little has hitherto been done in the way of rhetorical studies of early Greek and Syriac monastic literature. The Latin tradition, including works of translation, is treated in Adalbert de Vogüé, *Histoire littéraire*. For the *Life of Anthony* see also the works discussed in G. J. M. Bartelink, 'Die literarische Gattung der *Vita Antonii*'.

Egyptian monasticism is related to older models for spiritual life.<sup>8</sup> Likewise the strong emphasis on homelessness and on a life in the wilderness in the texts from Syria probably have ancient roots. It has also been argued that the differences between Egyptian and Syriac monastic tradition are partly due to differences between an Egyptian agrarian and a Syriac mercantile tradition.<sup>9</sup> Although the interpretation of ascetic behaviour and the social organisation of it are new in Christian monasticism, there is no reason to think that the monks did not avail themselves of existing social models. Even so, instead of seeing this as non-Christian influence, we ought to think of it as Christian re-interpretation and transformation of older forms and ideas.

In trying to understand how these various traditions combined into a gradually cohesive and ideologically united monastic movement, we have to focus on its two basic characteristics: the absolute emphasis on permanent celibacy and the renunciation of responsibility for the preservation of secular society. Here there is a radical break with ancient traditions. The concern is now almost entirely for the individual or the community to which one belongs, rather than for the family, the city or the empire. The liberation sought is not the liberation of the soul from the body, but of the entire self from the passing world. The transformation to be achieved is not a transformation of the world, but of the entire self. The universality of this idea, the invitation to anyone to join and the promises of real and visible results had a tremendous impact in a society where unrest, poverty and social insecurity were widespread. That such a strongly individualistic ideology could sustain an enduring social institution, which has made an immense contribution to the development of the society, is by and large due to the establishment of a new social organisation, the coenobitic monastery. Although monastic life in the East never became totally identified with life in a monastery, it was the creation of monasteries that saved the radical revival movement of the fourth and early fifth centuries.

It has been suggested that, on the social level, the rise of monasticism is linked to a demand for holy men as arbitrators in late ancient society.<sup>10</sup> As independent persons with direct access to heavenly powers, the monks could intervene on behalf of the poor, the sick and the displaced. From an early text like the *Life of Anthony* to the biographers of later monastic saints such as the stylites on the

8 For Egyptian traditions see Miriam Lichtheim, *Late Egyptian wisdom in the international context* and Wolf-Peter Funk, 'Ein doppelt überliefertes Stück spätägyptischer Weisheit'.

9 A. Guillaumont, 'Le dépassement comme forme d'ascèse', 50; R. Murray, *Symbols of the church and kingdom*, 28.

10 The discussion on the social role was initiated by the article by Peter Brown, 'The rise and function of the holy man'. A more recent addition is his 'Holy men'.

outskirts of Constantinople, we constantly see the monks interacting between rulers and citizens, as arbitrators in conflicts and as sources of consolation and inspiration in periods of distress. More problematic is the issue of the relation between monks and the ecclesiastical offices. In several of the earliest sources the monks are depicted as keeping a distance between themselves and the hierarchy. Later in the fourth century the bishops seem to have actively sought to make use of monks in various services, including ordaining them as bishops. During the fifth century, a tradition rapidly developed in the East that all bishops ought to be monks. There is, however, no evidence for any attempts to integrate all monks into the ordained ministry. Instead we find an interpretation of monastic life as a special ministry belonging to those who were not ordained (for example, in the late fifth-century writings of Dionysius the Areopagite: see his *Ecclesiastical hierarchy* 6). There is growing evidence that, in the late fourth century, there were conflicts between monks and bishops and attempts by the bishops to define proper monastic conduct. In the fifth century, we see a more active role of monastic communities in various ecclesiastical affairs, especially in the large cities, as well as attempts by different parties to enrol monks in their support. This practice is particularly pronounced in the wake of the Council of Chalcedon.

Sources for female monasticism are, unfortunately, less abundant. There seems, however, not to have been anything gender-specific about becoming or being a monk in the earliest period. The specific condition for female monks was only a reflection of the general position of women in late antiquity. Thus female ascetics were supposed to be weaker and in need of protection, and thus not suited for life in the wilderness. Female monks in the desert did in fact pretend to be men and, when their identity was revealed, were often hailed as having become male.<sup>11</sup> Women were on the one hand not expected to appear and to speak in public, but on the other they were famous for their role as founders, supporters and organisers of monastic communities. Hagiographical accounts of female monks, as well as their correspondence, show that they were expected to be as educated, as well-versed in the Bible and as competent in theological discourse as the men. It is striking that, from the beginning, women from the highest social classes took an active part in the emerging monastic tradition. This practice reached as high as the imperial family: fifth- and sixth-century empresses were among the most significant and politically important promoters of monasteries. The support given to various

<sup>11</sup> For female monks in early Egyptian tradition see Palladius, *H.L.* 3, 6, 28, 33, 34, 41, 46, 54–7, 59–61, 63–4, 69.

monastic communities from secular and ecclesiastical authorities was very often channelled through the hands of influential women.<sup>12</sup>

### Varieties

Debates about proper monastic conduct and necessary conditions for being regarded as a monk seem to have been part of the developments from the beginning. Various terms were used to signify particular monks, and attempts were made to define the main varieties and to set standards for proper monastic lifestyles. The best known of these were made by the Latin authors Jerome and John Cassian, who both claimed that there were three basic sorts of monks: anchorites, coenobites and a third group called by Jerome *sarabaites* and by Cassian *remnuoth*. The first two groups were easily identified with the already famous examples of Anthony and Pachomius, respectively, and the third characterised people who pretended to be monks and who were recognised by their instable life and wandering lifestyle. Since Jerome and Cassian were tremendously influential in reporting to the West on Eastern monasticism, this threefold scheme has been predominant in descriptions of monasticism and indeed continues to inform modern discussions of the history of monasticism. It is, however, evident that these categorisations are part of a broad-based polemic against contemporary monks and cannot be taken as a proper depiction of monastic varieties at that time. Jerome admits this by stating that the third group includes most of the monks of his era.<sup>13</sup> It is actually not possible to draw a sharp line between anchoritic and coenobitic monks; as for the monks who were on the move, some were actually living a rather strict coenobitic life, whereas others were hermits.

Ultimately, the combined efforts of secular and ecclesiastical authority succeeded in getting rid of the wandering monks, thus gradually reducing the kinds of monasticism to the two preferred groups. But there is no doubt that Jerome and Cassian's politically motivated conceptualisation fails to capture the complex richness of late ancient monasticism.

<sup>12</sup> Early biographies of prominent female monks include Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*, Jerome's *Letter to Marcella* and the *Life of Melania the Younger*. The role of rich women for the monastic establishments is well documented in the correspondence of both Jerome and John Chrysostom. The female part of early monastic tradition is analysed in Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God*.

<sup>13</sup> See Jerome, *Letter 22.34* and John Cassian, *Conlationes* 18.4, whose claims are enshrined in the *Rule of St Benedict* 1. The letter by Jerome is discussed in de Vogüé, *Histoire littéraire*, 1: 288–325. The entire idea of *genera monachorum* as presented by Jerome and Cassian is critically analysed in Caner, *Wandering, begging monks*, 4–18. See also Choat, "The development and usage of terms for "monks".



A less biased and more comprehensive view of the landscape of early monasticism makes it clear that there were in fact many varieties of monasticism in the first centuries. It seems possible to distinguish, at least theoretically, between six different kinds of monks on the basis of how and where they lived:

- *Monks attached to a church, or a shrine*; in our early sources these are primarily either female ascetics (known as virgins and widows) who lived attached, more or less closely, to a church and had certain rights and duties in the congregation, or else ascetic teachers and preachers who sometimes travelled from one congregation to another but did not adopt a permanent itinerant lifestyle. Celibate ascetics of this kind are known from all over the early church. They are acknowledged in the church orders from the *Apostolic tradition* onwards and are mentioned in apocryphal texts as well as *Acts of martyrs*.<sup>14</sup> They were most probably a significant element in the Montanist movement as well as in congregations sharing the radically dualist views of Marcion or other teachers of *gnosis*, though they are also prominent in the major centres of the early church. In most texts, the urban male celibate ascetics are soon designated 'monks' under the influence of the rapid growth of monasticism outside the cities and the spread of monastic literature, whereas the female celibate ascetics continue to be called 'virgins'. In general, the urban monks and virgins attached to churches and shrines were responsible for prayer and charitable work, ideally under the supervision of the bishop.
- *Members of an ascetic household*; here, the head of the household turns the family estate into a kind of monastery. This practice is first visible in the mid-fourth century, the best-known example being the household of the widowed mother of the Cappadocian fathers Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa.<sup>15</sup> There is, however, no reason to suppose that these were the first Christian households where a celibate ascetic life was a rule, at least after the birth of one or two children. These monastic households were, as far as our sources reveal, mainly established on the initiative of women, but could also include their husbands if they committed to continence. In some cases these household monasteries were made up of the family and their servants; in other cases non-relatives were invited to join, but the monastery remained the sole property of the founding family on whose wealth the establishment still depended. Due to continuous criticism and even complete rejection of

<sup>14</sup> See Hippolytus, *The Apostolic tradition*, 10, 12, 30.

<sup>15</sup> See Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*.



any cohabitation of female and male ascetics,<sup>16</sup> and the increased control of monastic practice by the bishops, the monastic households disappear in the fifth century. Many of them were undoubtedly transformed into separate monasteries for men and for women and opened up to non-members of the original family and its dependants.

- *Itinerant monks without any habitation of their own*; this group corresponds to the *remnuoth* or *sarabaites*, mentioned above. Quite probably the first use of the term *monachos* in the *Gospel of Thomas* refers to ascetics of this kind and it is not impossible that Jerome is correct when stating that, outside Egypt, this kind of monk is the most common. The evidence we have for itinerant monks in the fourth and fifth centuries mainly comes from Syria and Asia Minor. In the fourth century these celibate itinerant ascetics seem to have increasingly come in conflict with the established local churches and the bishops, over the questions of who had the right to preach and who had the right to material support from the Christian community. The independence of these monks from local clergy and liturgical life and from social ties, combined with their preaching of radical asceticism, made them the target of denunciations by local councils in the fourth and fifth centuries. Despite the attempts to eliminate this form of monasticism, it survived into the seventh century.<sup>17</sup>
- *Recluses or hermits, physically isolated in cells within or outside a monastery*; examples are found in both urban and rural settings. In some cases there seems to be a direct relation to the tradition of itinerant preaching, where the life as recluse follows upon a life of wandering; in other cases the background seems to be more in the tradition of the perfect philosophical life. However, many of the sources on recluses, especially on female recluses, depict the life of a recluse as a life of penitence. A major theme in the description of recluses is the emphasis on the need to flee from popularity earned either by preaching or by miracles. This does not mean that the hermit does not continue to teach, as we see from the examples of John of Lycopolis in the fourth century and Varsanuphios the Elder in the sixth. The latter, like several other recluses, lived in the middle of a monastery, but refused to speak with anyone except a trusted disciple. A different type of hermit, not

<sup>16</sup> Canons against cohabitation of male and female ascetics begin with the canons of Elvira (306), Ancyra (315) and Nicaea (325) and the theme is a prominent feature in fourth-century literature on asceticism; for further references and discussion, see Elm, 'Virgins of God', 47–51.

<sup>17</sup> The sources are gathered and discussed in Caner, *Wandering, begging monks*, 50–82 and 104–16.

hidden from sight but still untouchable, is primarily found in Syrian sources that relate the lives of monks fixed to a tree, a certain stone or a pillar. The most famous of these was the older Symeon the Stylite, who stood on his pillar on a hilltop in northern Syria for forty-seven years until his death in 458.<sup>18</sup> Such a monk is both immovable and out of reach, but still visible and often also to be contacted through a trusted disciple.

- *Anchorites living in cells, usually a master and one or two disciples often clustered in larger groups*; this form of monasticism is characterised by its interaction with society and the wider monastic community and by its stress on the teaching of disciples. The emergence of organised anchoritic monasticism seems to be largely an Egyptian matter, represented early in the fourth century by St Anthony and later by the desert fathers of Nitria and Scetis, among them Evagrius. With a strong emphasis on authority based in experience, on the teaching of disciples and on obedience, the anchoritic tradition gives an impression of having its roots partly in the tradition of philosophical teaching. The emphasis on the complete isolation and remoteness of the cell of the single monk, stressed in the sources, is in many cases probably a literary ideal, rather than a physical reality.
- *Coenobites, monks living in a centrally organised monastery, often enclosed by a wall*; this completely new model is first visible in the foundations by Pachomius in Egypt. The rapid growth and diffusion of this type of monastic life throughout the empire and its successful history is yet to be explained. Undoubtedly rooted both in the urban establishment of ascetic households and the anchoritic tradition of a master and his disciple, the communal monasteries create new models of ascetic life and establish new tensions in Christianity by providing strong alternative institutions within the church. In the sources for the earliest monasteries of this kind, three traits stand out as characteristic. The first is the emphasis on learning and teaching. The members of the community are not only taught the rules necessary for an organised community but also the motives behind them and the biblical support given to them, and are supposed not only to listen to exhortations, but to undertake study through reading. Second, the monasteries are organised for common work, primarily either agricultural or social, and in their relations to other sections of society they function as economic entities. Third, the

<sup>18</sup> On Symeon there are three different *Lives*: one by Theodoret in his *Historia religiosa* 28, one by a disciple called Antonius, and an anonymous Syriac *Life*. All three are conveniently gathered in English translation with references to editions and explanatory notes in Robert Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*.

monasteries are governed by a defined leadership responsible for all relations to the authorities, civic as well as ecclesiastical.

Even with this classification scheme in place, it should be noted that not all monks were defined by these categories, that not all monks remained within a given category all their life, and that communities occasionally changed over time. Especially during the fourth and the earlier part of the fifth century, before the increase of episcopal power as an outcome of the Council of Chalcedon, the monastic scene was characterised by experiments and a high degree of mobility. It is only later that a clear tendency towards coenobitism appears, with the result that ascetics in the cities form single-sex communities and recluses as well as itinerant monks attach themselves to, or create, stable communities.

### Local developments

Since there is no single origin and no unified development of monasticism, and since there were significant differences in the monastic developments between various regions of the Eastern Mediterranean due to different historical backgrounds as well as different social and political circumstances, the history of early monasticism will here be treated separately for five main regions: Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor and Constantinople. However, this should not blind us to the great mobility within monasticism between the various regions and the rapid diffusion of ideas, models and texts. A certain bias towards Egypt is caused first by the uneven distribution of the sources, and second by the fact that the developments in Egypt to a great extent both pre-dated and (through the literary portrait of Egyptian monasticism) deeply influenced developments in the other regions.

#### *Egypt*

Earliest evidence from Egyptian papyri shows that 'monk' was a current designation for persons who were clearly engaged in business and were property owners; most probably, it denoted someone who was celibate for religious reasons. This kind of social involvement is borne out by further evidence from two larger archives for communities of monks in fourth-century Egypt, which contain letters dealing with pastoral and business matters: the archives of Paphnutius attest to a monk (addressed as a spiritual father) who was apparently a well-known representative of Bishop Athanasius' opponents, and the

Nephoros archives describe the business activities of a larger monastery.<sup>19</sup> In the absence of any archaeological evidence for fourth-century monasticism in Egypt, these documents are invaluable sources to complement the literary sources. They prove that Anthony, Pachomius and their successors were not the only monks in Egypt in the first half of the fourth century, and that the early monastic tradition was both literate and socially integrated in the economic and cultural environment. The latter fact is also substantiated by the report of Epiphanius about a certain monk, Hieracas, who was writing in the 320s and by the literary papyri from monastic libraries of the fourth century.<sup>20</sup>

The first monk about whom we have more extensive knowledge is Anthony the Great. His international reputation was secured through the biography written by Athanasius soon after his death in AD 356, which appeared in two Latin versions shortly thereafter. The Latin version, as is well known, figures prominently in the eighth book of Augustine's *Confessions*, thus indicating the tremendous impact the *Life* had within thirty years of its initial appearance. Yet it is clear from other sources that it was not the biography that made Anthony famous, but rather that the bishop wrote his version of Anthony's life both to claim Anthony for the church and to promote his own view of monastic ideals. In addition to the *Vita*, our main sources for information about Anthony are his letters, the *Apophthegmata patrum* and the references to him in several other early monastic texts. However, these other sources are silent regarding many biographical details and it is only the *Vita* that tells us that he was born to wealthy parents in 251, that at the age of eighteen he gave up all his belongings after their death, and that he then lived as a recluse for more than twenty years. Similarly, the *Vita* is our only source for the history of his withdrawal into the interior desert and his visit to Alexandria to strengthen the martyrs under Licinius. A reference to him in the index to the festal letters of Athanasius makes it clear that he was a well-known monastic figure in 337, and a passage in the *Life of Pachomius* shows him to be an old man revered as a pioneer for monasticism at the death of Pachomius in AD 346. His letters, which seem to be a kind of testament of his teaching, most probably appeared around 340. His death in 356 is attested by Jerome. The letters show that Anthony was a teacher acquainted with contemporary Alexandrian traditions represented

<sup>19</sup> Editions by H. I. Bell, *Jews and Christians in Egypt*; B. Kramer and J. C. Shelton, *Das Archiv des Nephoros*.

<sup>20</sup> For a broad discussion of these matters see Samuel Rubenson, *The letters of St. Antony*, 116–25.

by Clement and Origen, and the subsequent tradition in Egypt and Palestine makes it clear that his influence was far-reaching.<sup>21</sup>

At the time of Anthony's death, monasticism in Lower Egypt – especially in the area known as Nitria and Scetis (the modern Wadi 'n-Natrûn) – experienced an immense growth and the circulation of the *Life of Anthony* drew the attention of the wider Christian tradition to the Egyptian desert.<sup>22</sup> In the last quarter of the century, a kind of 'ascetic tourism' developed with numerous visitors from abroad coming to see, admire and emulate the fathers of the desert, some even staying in Egypt for years. Among these were prominent Christian intellectuals like Rufinus, Melania the Elder, Jerome, Evagrius of Pontus, Palladius, John Cassian and the anonymous author of the *History of the monks in Egypt*. Through their writings and their own establishments the forms of life and the teachings of the monks had a deep impact throughout the Christian empire during the first decades of the fifth century. Of particular importance is Evagrius, who had served under Gregory of Nazianzus in Cappadocia and Constantinople and after a short stay in Jerusalem settled in Nitria. He was condemned in the sixth century on account of some esoteric speculations, but his ascetic writings have remained basic for Eastern monasticism to this very day. The most important and widely diffused source for the transmission of the ideals of the early Egyptian tradition, the *Apophthegmata patrum*, was collected and edited anonymously in Palestine in the second half of the fifth century and later enlarged, re-organised and re-edited in all the languages of early Christianity.<sup>23</sup>

The first-known monk to have organised and supervised larger monastic communities was Pachomius, who in the 320s established a series of monasteries for both men and women that were linked to each other at Tabennesi in Upper Egypt. Under his leadership and that of his successors, a series of rules developed which through translations came to influence the entire monastic tradition. Sharing many of the basic ascetic ideals and their biblical and theological foundations with Lower Egyptian monasticism, the Pachomian tradition is marked by a much stronger emphasis on communal responsibilities and

<sup>21</sup> The various sources on Anthony are discussed in *ibid.*, 163–84.

<sup>22</sup> Rufinus gives the figure 3,000 for the monks in the area of Nitria, outside Alexandria, in 373 (*H.E.* 2.3), and fifteen years later Palladius counted 5,000 monks (*H.L.* 7.2); of course, these figures need not be taken as precise demographic calculations to appreciate the point: the desert had become a city.

<sup>23</sup> The first to record sayings of the desert fathers in writing was Evagrius in the 390s, but there is no evidence for larger collections before the mid-fifth century. For a Palestinian original redaction see L. Regnault, *Les pères du désert*, 65–83 and the discussion and references in Graham Gould, *The desert fathers on monastic community*, 9–17.

on establishing a new alternative society in opposition to the surrounding pagan culture. While the ascetic goal (that is, purity of heart and seeing God) remained the same, the monks were also expected to help each other and work for the common good of the monastery.<sup>24</sup> The Pachomian monasteries, as well as other similar institutions, rapidly became important economic enterprises and no doubt contributed to the growth of a Coptic literate society and thus to the rapid decline of the Greek tradition, which was identified as pagan. The most famous monastery coming out of this tradition was the White Monastery near Sohag. Under the leadership of Shenoute (c. 360–466), it became the most significant centre for monasticism in Upper Egypt.<sup>25</sup> Shenoute was himself a prolific writer in Coptic and, judging from the preserved Coptic papyri, his monastery became a centre for Coptic literature and learning. Shenoute is primarily known for his rules and the strict organisation of monastic life in his establishments as well as his attacks on pagan tradition and heretics.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to these well-known early centres of Egyptian monasticism, evidence from the papyri and from several accounts given by visitors and historians indicates that there were numerous other monasteries with thousands of monks already in the fourth century. Many of these are likely to have belonged to the Melitian party, condemned by the Council of Nicaea, and others, no doubt, held theological opinions not acceptable to the church. Not only the Nag Hammadi codices, but also other apocryphal writings, were read and presumably copied in monastic circles, and there is ample evidence for debate and uneasiness about differences in belief.<sup>27</sup> Although there is no clear evidence for non-Christian monasteries, it is likely that there were centres for both Manichaeism and non-Christian Gnosticism that were similar to the early monastic centres.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, it is possible that some of the persons called monks in our texts were not only heterodox in belief but were perhaps even non-Christians.

24 On Pachomius, see Philip Rousseau, *Pachomius*. The primary material about Pachomius and his monasteries is available in English translation: Armand Veilleux, trans., *The Pachomian Koinonia*.

25 On the early career of Shenoute, see now Stephen Emmel, 'Shenoute the monk'.

26 For Shenoute and the White Monastery, see Rebecca Krawiec, *Shenoute and the women of the White Monastery*; Stephen Emmel, *Shenoute's literary corpus*; Johannes Hahn, *Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt*, 223–69.

27 The relationship between the Nag Hammadi Codices and Pachomian monasticism has created a long-standing debate. For a summary and new reflections, see James Goehring, 'The provenance of the Nag Hammadi Codices once more'.

28 On Manichaeism in Egypt see G. Stroumsa, 'The Manichaean challenge to Egyptian Christianity'.

During the fourth century there seems to have been increasing tensions between parts of the monastic tradition and the ecclesiastical leadership in Alexandria. Bishop Athanasius (*sed.* 328–73) struggled to promote not only an ascetic tradition within the Church of Alexandria but also to connect the various forms of monastic experiments in Egypt to the orthodox tradition and to the Alexandrian patriarchate.<sup>29</sup> He inaugurated a policy of ordaining leading monastic figures as bishops, which, although successful in the long run, was strongly resisted by many of the monks who regarded the bishop's office as in itself incompatible with a true monastic life. There are also signs of a growing conflict between a more powerful established church and monastic groups. In the last decade of the fourth century the tension erupted into a violent conflict, originating with monastic critique of Theophilus, the bishop of Alexandria (*sed.* 385–412), but manifested in a clash over the legacy of Origen as part of the so-called 'First Origenist Controversy'.<sup>30</sup> The result was that, in 399, the intellectual leaders of Lower Egyptian monasticism were expelled from Egypt on the accusation of being Origenists. One of these monks, Evagrius of Pontus, whose writings afford us a privileged glimpse into the appropriation of Origen by these monks, had died a few months before.

During the fifth century, a rapid decrease in the anchoritic tradition in Egypt was caused by series of nomadic attacks on the often wealthy monastic establishments (especially on the unprotected communities in the deserts near Alexandria) and by the tightening of ecclesiastical control. In response to the nomads, monks gathered in larger monasteries with protecting walls and, in response to the patriarch, they began cultivating good relations with civic and ecclesiastical authorities. Close relations between the patriarchate of Alexandria and the monasteries was strengthened by the establishment of important monasteries near the city, which directly contributed to the almost universal monastic support for the patriarchs in the Christological conflicts and the strong monastic opposition to the Council of Chalcedon in 451. (A direct link between the ascetic ideals of the Egyptian monastic tradition and the rejection of any 'two natures' formula in Christology has also been suggested).<sup>31</sup> During the persecutions of the non-Chalcedonians in Egypt in the sixth and especially the early seventh centuries, the monasteries became the centres of the Coptic church and its refusal to accept the policy of the emperors. According to the Coptic sources the monasteries became the refuge of

<sup>29</sup> See David Brakke, *Athanasius and the politics of asceticism*.

<sup>30</sup> See Elizabeth Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*, with references to previous literature. Still useful is H. G. Evelyn-White, *The monasteries of the Wādī 'n Natrūn*, II: 125–44.

<sup>31</sup> See Jan-Eric Steppa, *John Rufus*.



the non-Chalcedonian patriarchs in time of persecution, especially under the turbulent years of the emperor Heraclius (*regn.* 610–41). The Muslim conquest of Egypt in 641 confirmed the monastic imprint on the entire Church of Egypt.

### *Palestine*

Due to the very special ecclesiastical position of Palestine after the building activities of Helena and Constantine and the rapid growth of pilgrimage to the holy sites in the fourth century, monastic developments followed very different lines here than in Egypt. From its beginnings, monasticism in Palestine was international and multicultural. Pilgrims from all over the Christian world settled in and around the holy places and established monasteries functioning as hostels and houses of prayer adjacent to the churches. These were naturally dependent on the support of wealthy families and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Also the strong desert tradition, especially of Judaea, was largely controlled by the hierarchy and dependent on imperial support.<sup>32</sup> Due to the various backgrounds of the monks there were linguistic barriers and soon Latins, Syrians, Armenians and Georgians established their own monasteries with prayers in their own languages. Monastic leaders were thus often foreigners and the monasteries by and large did not have much relation to each other. The major exceptions were the monasteries founded by or closely related to John Saba (439–532),<sup>33</sup> the greatest figure in early Palestinian monasticism.

No documentary or archaeological evidence has yet appeared that can convincingly demonstrate any monastic settlements or institutions before the middle of the fourth century. The tradition that Chariton was the first monk in Palestine and settled in the Judaeian desert before the time of Constantine depends solely on the hagiographical account of his life written in the sixth century.<sup>34</sup> His name is, however, preserved in the place names of some of the earliest monastic sites in Judaea (e.g., Wadi Khureitun, Khirbet Khureitun and Mu'allak Khureitun) and this fact tends to corroborate the view that he was a historical figure who lived a monastic life in the desert in the middle of that century.<sup>35</sup> The sources are also meagre for Hilarion, who is claimed by Jerome to have been the first monk in Palestine, establishing himself near Gaza around 310; we are mainly dependent on Jerome's story of his life written in the

32 On monasticism in Palestine see Derwas Chitty, *The desert a city* and John Binns, *Ascetics and ambassadors of Christ*.

33 See Joseph Patrich, *Sabas, Leader of Palestinian monasticism*.

34 See *Life of Chariton*, ed. Garitte. For a survey of archaeological evidence on the monastic settlement of this region, see O. Sion, 'The monasteries of the "Desert of the Jordan"'.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521812443.029>

35 For references to the *Life of Chariton* and the sites, see Chitty, *The desert a city*, 14–15.

380s – a story which in fact appears to have been written in order to show that monasticism in Palestine emerged simultaneously with the Egyptian tradition and that Hilarion was an associate of Anthony.<sup>36</sup> It is only with the famous heresiologist Epiphanius, who according to Jerome had been a close associate of Hilarion, and who must have been a monk of some repute in 367 when he was elected bishop of Salamis on Cyprus, that we encounter a Palestinian monk about whom we have several independent sources, and from whom we also have writings.

The first mention of monks to be found in Palestine are the monks of Jerusalem referred to in the catecheses of Cyril of Jerusalem, a text dated to the 350s.<sup>37</sup> It is also in Jerusalem that the first monasteries we have any details about are found. These are the Latin establishments of Innocent the Italian and Melania the Elder, later joined by Rufinus, which were erected in Jerusalem in the 370s. Soon numerous other monasteries were also found in and around Jerusalem, and in the 380s Jerome settled in Bethlehem where he was joined by a group of ascetic women from Rome. In the early fifth century, further Latin establishments (among others) grew up in Jerusalem, primarily catering to pilgrims. These monasteries were naturally closely related to the bishops – later, patriarchs – of Jerusalem, and thus also to imperial ecclesiastical policy. Recent research on the development of liturgical life in Jerusalem indicates that these monastic establishments played a significant role, especially in the development of the canonical hours.<sup>38</sup>

Although the first steps towards monastic life in Palestine were probably taken by ascetic Christians settling in the desert independently of events in Egypt, and in spite of the fact that many of the leading figures came from Rome or Asia Minor, there is no doubt that the emergence of monasticism in Palestine was deeply influenced by the Egyptian tradition. Several of the prominent pioneers had either visited Egypt or referred to the stories about the Egyptian scene that quickly spread in the last decades of the fourth century. But the main vehicle for Egyptian influence was most probably the influx of monks from Egypt in the first half of the fifth century. Already in 399/400, a large group of monks from Nitria and Scetis came to Palestine as the result of the so-called Origenist crisis. Later others emigrated due to the attacks on the monastic settlements by the nomads of the desert. Some settled in Sinai, but

<sup>36</sup> See Jerome, *Life of Hilarion*. For critical comments on the historicity of the text see Rubenson, *The letters of St. Antony*, 176–7.

<sup>37</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses* 4.24, 13.33.

<sup>38</sup> See Stig Frøyshov, 'L'horloge "georgien" du Sinaiticus Ibericus 34'; the publication of Dr Frøyshov's thesis is forthcoming.

others went to the plains around Gaza, the Judaeen desert, or the Jordan valley. The tradition they brought with them, codified in the stories and sayings of the *Apophthegmata patrum*, made a strong impact and several of the monks from Egypt became leading figures in Palestine, like Abba Isaiah and Abba Zeno, who were to have a prominent role in the growth of the important monastic establishments in the Gaza region.<sup>39</sup>

In the Judaeen desert, monasticism grew rapidly in the first decades of the fifth century. A major figure was Euthymius, a young monk from Armenia, who settled as a hermit in the desert close to Jerusalem in 404. Soon other monks (among them, Theoctistus) joined him and groups of cells soon became more or less coenobitic monasteries. Here a tradition emerged, which was later followed by John Saba,<sup>40</sup> according to which young novices were first schooled into monasticism in strictly coenobitic houses and later allowed to move to the semi-anchoretic monasteries, which were called *laura* in Palestine. The origin of the word is unknown, but it probably signifies a lane or kind of market, since it is used of clusters of cells along a ridge centred on a common church. Here contact with other monks was less frequent than in the coenobium during the daily routine of individual life. The proximity to the holy places and the international character of these desert establishments resulted in very lively communications and strong bonds to the ecclesiastical and political centres in Palestine and abroad. This can be seen not least in the deep involvement of several monks in the conflicts around the Councils of Ephesus in 431 and 449 and Chalcedon in 451.

For monasticism in Palestine, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 was a watershed. The rich Egyptian connections (especially in the region of Gaza), as well as opposition to developments in theology and cult, which were regarded as threats to the original and pure tradition, resulted in a vigorous hostility to the very idea of a council, supported by imperial force, deposing the patriarch of Alexandria and introducing new rules and new definitions of faith. The patriarch of Jerusalem, Juvenalis, who had promised to defend the tradition, was seen as a traitor and prevented from returning to his see. Instead a monk named Theodosius was elected as new patriarch. When imperial power was restored a year later the monasteries in and around Jerusalem gradually decided to accept Chalcedon and Juvenalis. A significant role was played in this by the empress Eudokia, the estranged wife of Theodosius II, who had settled in a tower in the wilderness east of Jerusalem in the 440s. But monasteries further away and in

<sup>39</sup> See Samuel Rubenson, 'The Egyptian relations of early Palestinian monasticism'.

<sup>40</sup> Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Sabas* 7.

the plains remained anti-Chalcedonian. Threatened by imperial force, several leading monastic figures among the anti-Chalcedonians fled to Egypt. After the conflicts over Chalcedon, the close relation between the patriarchate and the monastic leaders in and around Jerusalem evolved into a system whereby one or more heads of monasteries were appointed in charge of all monastic communities with the title 'archimandrite'.<sup>41</sup>

Due to increasing imperial interest in Palestine as well as a steadily growing flow of pilgrims, the monasteries in Palestine and especially in the Judaeen desert were flourishing in the sixth century. An important centre was established in 483 in the desert east of Bethlehem by John Saba, who like many of the prominent Palestinian monks came from Asia Minor. His *laura* soon attracted numerous educated monks from various backgrounds. Conflicts about leadership and theology led to a schism, and the establishment of the New *Laura*, which became a centre for the defence of the Evagrian-Origenist tradition.<sup>42</sup> Several factors combined to produce enmity towards Sabas and his leadership, part of them probably referring to his lack of education, others to the strictness of his rule, to his monastic organisation and perhaps also to financial matters. Sabas, however, gained and retained the support of the patriarch and later the emperor. As part of the Second Origenist Controversy he, like his 'Origenist' adversaries, travelled to Constantinople. After the death of Sabas in 532, the 'Origenists' gained in influence, but the decisions of the council in Constantinople in 543 and the ecumenical council of 553 settled the issue. It seems that the close contacts between the monasteries and the patriarchate of Jerusalem, as well as the importance of Jerusalem to the imperial family, made it impossible for any opposition to retain control of Palestinian monasteries.

### Syria

Although many of our early sources indicate an Egyptian background for Syrian monastic tradition, there is no doubt that the origins of monasticism in Syria are independent of developments in Egypt. The earliest references to independent Christian ascetics point to a tradition of itinerant preachers claiming a kind of apostolic authority.<sup>43</sup> A first description of communities

<sup>41</sup> See Binns, *Ascetics and ambassadors of Christ* and Steppa, *John Rufus*.

<sup>42</sup> See especially Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Cyriacus*; but note, too, the prudent call for caution with regard to the use of Cyril's work sounded by D. Hombergen in his *The Second Origenist Controversy*.

<sup>43</sup> The most important sources that combine itinerant preaching and ascetic life in Syria are *The Acts of Thomas*, probably written in the first half of the third century, and the two letters to the virgins, attributed to Clement of Rome but most probably written in Syria in the third century.

of ascetics is found in the early fourth-century Syriac writer Aphrahat. The ascetics are here called *bnay qyama*, a term which most probably refers to some kind of vow or covenant. The *bnay qyama* lived in ascetic and celibate households in the towns, in some cases men and women together, something Aphrahat disliked. Another Syriac term that is used to describe monks, *ihidaya* (meaning 'only-begotten', but also 'single-minded'), indicates that the monk was in some sense identified with Christ the 'Only-Begotten'. Like the use of the expression *bnay qyama*, this term points to a Jewish background. This background is also visible in the references to monks in the writings of Ephrem the Syrian.<sup>44</sup>

Although both Aphrahat and Ephrem indicate that there were settled monastic communities in Syria in the mid-fourth century, it is evident that the more common form of monastic life in Syria in the fourth century was the itinerant monk, with or without a group of followers. These itinerant monks are known mostly from hostile sources, especially the denouncement of some of them as heretics. They are often referred to as Messalians or Euchites, meaning those who pray constantly, and under this name condemned by councils in Syria and Asia Minor in the 390s, in Constantinople in 426 and in the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431.<sup>45</sup> Their spiritual tradition is represented by the so-called Macarian homilies, which were probably written in Syria in the later fourth century. There are several indications that, in the early fifth century, some with their followers went from Syria through Asia Minor to Constantinople. In addition to being accused of doctrinal error, they are often denounced as lazy beggars and accused of both immoral behaviour and neglect of sacraments and church order. An important community of this background was the so-called *akoimetoï*, that is, the 'Sleepless Ones', a group founded by a certain Alexander. According to his biographer, he was a well-educated scribe in Constantinople who had renounced his possessions and become a monk in a Mesopotamian monastery during the 370s.<sup>46</sup> He soon left the monastery and lived as an itinerant preacher with a large following of ever-praying disciples who begged for their livelihood. They were active mainly in the countryside, but were sometimes also found in cities, including Antioch. In the 420s

44 See Caner, *Wandering, begging monks*, 55–7; Sidney Griffith, 'Asceticism in the Church of Syria'; Philippe Escolan, *Monachisme et église*; Sebastian Brock, *The luminous eye*, 131–41.

45 For recent studies on the 'Messalians' see Columba Stewart, "Working the earth of the heart"; Klaus Fitschen, *Messalianismus und Antimessealianismus*; Marcus Plested, *The Macarian legacy*.

46 *Life of Alexander the Sleepless* (PO 6); see further J. Pargoire, 'Un mot sur les acémètes'.

Alexander settled in Constantinople; in due course, we will need to say more about the monastery that he established there.

These forms of Syrian monasticism often attracted condemnations, which had an impact on the literary evidence: even in the *Life of Alexander the Sleepless* one detects an unmistakable defensiveness. But not all contemporary writings on early Syriac monks reflect these controversies. For example, Theodoret of Cyrrhus (c. 393–c. 460), whose *History of the monks of Syria* provides the first detailed description of Syrian monasticism, is much more positive in his account of the early monks. According to him, the first monks were James of Nisibis, who lived as an ascetic hermit before he became bishop of the town before 325, and Julian Saba, who founded a community in the 320s. From his writings, it appears that the earliest tradition is to be found in Osroene and Mesopotamia, and that it was only towards the end of the fourth century that numerous monastic establishments began to appear around Antioch, Apamea and Beroe as well. But Theodoret's account focuses on the radical practices of hermits in northeastern Syria, and should not be taken as a trustworthy image of the entire monastic tradition in Syria.

The most famous monk depicted by Theodoret was Symeon the Elder, the first stylite.<sup>47</sup> As a young man, Symeon became a monk at the monastery of Teleda in 403. But he was forced to leave the monastery after some ten years, on account of his severe ascetic practice. He established himself as an open-air solitary on a small hill. To manifest his persistence and immovable standing in prayer, he attached himself to a rock and later stood on a pillar. The height of his pillar was gradually increased until it reached approximately eighteen metres. Symeon's standing on a pillar attracted people not only from northern Syria but from all over the empire – even in his own lifetime, small statues of him were found in Rome! This does not mean, however, that Symeon lacked critics. Several sources reveal that his lifestyle was called into question. These criticisms were so significant that Theodoret devoted a section of his description to defending Symeon's actions. (It should be noted that Theodoret was writing while Symeon was still alive.) The emphasis here on the role of Symeon as a missionary to the pagans of the area and especially to the nomads is important. It places Symeon in the tradition of the apostolic preacher, albeit now not an itinerant ascetic, but someone who instead attracts the world to himself. The sources on Symeon also reveal a probably widespread tension in

47 Hans Lietzmann, *Das Leben des heiligen Symeon Stylites*, is still the only major analysis of the various *Lives* of Symeon. Also useful is Hartmut Gustav Blerch, *Die Säule im Weltgeviert*. For a more recent contribution, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, 'The Stylite's liturgy'.

Syrian monasticism between the celebrated solitary ascetics and the communities. Several other sources also show a strong emphasis on the individual and describe the role of the monastery as largely consisting in being a preparatory arena and a source of support for the most celebrated ascetics.

In Syria (as in Palestine), the monastic tradition generally sided with the opposition against the Council of Chalcedon in 451; further east, monks were already aligning themselves against the Council of Ephesus in 431. Even taking into consideration the theological issues involved, it is clear that the monks were largely concerned to express dissatisfaction with the close collaboration between the bishops, who were often well-educated men from the wealthy classes, and government officials. The Syrian monks described in our sources were usually at home in the rural areas or among the poorer strata of society. Those who were settled in monasteries or as hermits at the outskirts of the towns were deeply attached to the local population and acted on their behalf in the time of crisis. Our best source for monasticism in Syria after 451 is the account by John of Ephesus (c. 507–86).<sup>48</sup> By his time, the coenobitic tradition seems to have overshadowed the earlier forms of monastic life. The monasteries were well-developed and autonomous centres. Within them, both ecclesiastical leaders and recluses found their place and support. The monasteries functioned as both schools and hospitals and a refuge in time of crisis – an important consideration for inhabitants of eastern Syria, which was after all border country between the Roman and the Persian empires during a period often at daggers drawn. Although persecuted by the authorities for their opposition to the Council of Chalcedon, the monasteries remained strongholds in the conflicts with the Persians.

#### *Asia Minor*

The rise of monasticism in Asia Minor is linked to Eustathius of Sebaste, an ascetic leader who became bishop of Sebaste in the 360s. By that time, he was already a famous figure and highly regarded as a monastic pioneer in Constantinople as well as in Caesarea.<sup>49</sup> The canons of the synod of Gangra, most probably held in 340, give us a glimpse of the practices and views of his followers.<sup>50</sup> In addition to wearing special clothes, not cutting their hair and allowing male and female ascetics to live together, there is a radicalisation of

<sup>48</sup> See Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Asceticism and society in crisis*.

<sup>49</sup> Sozomen, *H.E.* 4.27, 4.20.

<sup>50</sup> Our source for Gangra is the *epistula synodica*, which is found in P.-P. Joannou, ed. *Discipline générale antique*. For the date, see J. Gribomont, 'Saint Basile et le monachisme enthousiaste', 126. T. D. Barnes, 'The date of the Council of Gangra', argues for 355.



the gospel by way of condemning marriage, wealth and manual work, and there is also a certain contempt for the clergy of the church. Even though care is needed in making use of the condemnations from Gangra, it is not implausible that they are a substantially accurate description of contemporary monastic practices; after all, its description is broadly corroborated by evidence from Syrian sources about the radical itinerant celibate ascetics who were later repeatedly rejected as Messalians. But there is no need to posit Syrian influence to explain the phenomenon. After all, Asia Minor had since the second and third centuries been home to such groups as the Montanists and other radical Christians; the synod at Gangra could well have been responding to an occurrence that had simply arisen locally. When Eustathius became a bishop, his more radical followers refused to settle in the city and serve the poor; instead, according to Epiphanius, they continued their itinerant open-air monastic life.<sup>51</sup> References to begging as well as itinerant monks in Asia Minor are subsequently found in numerous other sources, although only occasionally equated with Messalians.<sup>52</sup> Even if designating Eustathius' followers as Messalians is questionable, the simple fact that the monks constantly moved no doubt facilitated the exchange of ideas and literature between groups and individuals in Syria, Asia Minor and Constantinople.

More settled forms of monastic life are first attested in the description of the turning of the household of Emmelia, the mother of Basil and Gregory, into a monastery after the death of her husband, around 345.<sup>53</sup> According to Gregory, Macrina (325–80), the oldest sister, who had decided for a celibate ascetic life already in her youth, was instrumental in the change and was the real head of the monastery even before Emmelia's death. The monastery was located on the family estate and included both a section for men and a section for women. The monks were family members as well as servants and former slaves. Situated in a rural area, the life of the monastery was divided between manual work, including agriculture and hunting, and prayer. The monastery of Macrina stands out as the first ascetic household turned monastery that we know of, as well as the first independent female institution of its kind. To what extent there were other similar family monastic estates in Asia Minor then and later we do not know.

A major impulse for settled monastic life in Asia Minor came from the activities of Basil of Caesarea. When returning from his studies in Athens in 351, Basil, under the influence of Eustathius, decided to live a celibate ascetic

<sup>51</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 75.2.3 and 75.3.2.

<sup>52</sup> Caner, *Wandering, begging monks*, 104–77, 158–205.

<sup>53</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*; for an analysis see Elm, 'Virgins of God', 78–105.

life and made attempts to settle as an anchorite in the countryside near the monastery of Macrina.<sup>54</sup> His ideal was closer to the philosophical tradition of a solitary life in accordance with nature and devoted to contemplation. For unknown reasons, Basil gave up his life in the country and settled in the city, where he was soon ordained presbyter and later bishop. In Caesarea, Basil established a monastery under his supervision, and most importantly wrote down guidelines for the monastic life, subsequently known, rather imprecisely, as his monastic 'rules'.<sup>55</sup> The monastery was to serve the poor and the sick. The most significant difference was that it should be under strict control of the bishop and that obedience was made a fundamental rule. Due to the influence of Basil and the spread of his writings, this new type of urban monastery came to have a great influence in the following centuries.

One of our best sources for urban monasticism in Asia Minor is, however, the writings of Nilus of Ancyra.<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately we know very little about him, his biography having been conflated with another Nilus, a monk of Sinai. He is not mentioned by any contemporary source. Another problem is that, after Evagrius was condemned, some of Evagrius' writings circulated under Nilus' name. His first writing seems to be a letter dated 390, written at a time when he was already a monastic leader, and his last text must have been written c. 430.<sup>57</sup> Palladius reports that, in Nilus' time, Ancyra had at least 2,000 virgins as well as a number of patrons willing to support virgins and monks alike.<sup>58</sup> In Nilus' writings, we find a vivid depiction and forceful condemnation of unsettled and uneducated monks menacing urban residents, begging for food in exchange for prayer and hymns, as well as of more wealthy citizens fleeing their social duties and trying to survive as monastic farmers on their country estates, but compromising themselves in the markets. According to Nilus, monasticism is incompatible with the necessity of begging no less than with manual work in order to subsist. His ideal is the silent monastery of contemplation where regular manual work is for the control of passions, rather than for subsistence. The proper economic basis should thus be either the wealth of the founder or the patronage of affluent benefactors. Monks are to stay in their monastery and be properly educated in monastic philosophy and monastic virtues, not

<sup>54</sup> For the monastic experiences and experiments of Basil see Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea*, 61–82, 136–44, 190–232.

<sup>55</sup> See now A. Silvas, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great*.

<sup>56</sup> There is no major study of Nilus. For an analysis of his writings, see Karl Heussi, *Untersuchungen zu Nilus' dem Asketen* and Marie-Gabrielle Guérard, 'Nil d'Ancyre'.

<sup>57</sup> In 1668, Allatius published over a thousand letters attributed to Nilus; his collection is reprinted in PG 79: 81–581.

<sup>58</sup> Palladius, *H.L.* 66–7.

walk around trying to please benefactors by sweet preaching, beautiful prayers or useless blessings. Nilus' letters reveal a strong emphasis on education and spiritual guidance.<sup>59</sup>

### *Constantinople*

The beginnings of monasticism in Constantinople are linked to one of the earliest bishops of the city, Macedonius, and to his deacon Marathonius. The latter is said to have been encouraged by Eustathius of Sebaste. According to Sozomen, he founded not only urban monasteries, but also hospitals and poorhouses served by the monks, thus initiating a close link between monastic life and care for the poor and sick in the capital.<sup>60</sup> The monastic houses in Constantinople seem to have been primarily located in the outskirts and often attached to important shrines where relics of martyrs or saints were protected and honoured by the monks. In the fifth century, there seems to have been an almost endless row of shrines and monastic settlements in the suburbs of Constantinople leading off along the Bosphorus. These monastic houses and their welfare programmes were financed by the patronage of rich officials and families, including the emperor himself. This is made clear in the history of the first famous monk of Constantinople, Isaac, who arrived in the city in the 370s to combat Arianism and who, after the rise of Theodosius, became the central figure of Constantinopolitan monasticism until his death around 416.<sup>61</sup> In this period, monastic presence in Constantinople grew rapidly as the capital had great appeal for anyone who was in search of better income, a larger audience or a higher reputation. Attempts by the emperors to ban monks from the city proved futile and eventually had to be retracted. Thus the emperor Theodosius I in 392 cancelled a law promulgated only two years earlier ordering all monks to stay in deserted places.<sup>62</sup> These bans were impractical because the monks had made themselves indispensable for civic administration by becoming providers of welfare for a growing poor and potentially disruptive layer of society (not to mention serving as spiritual advisers in times of crisis). The growth of monasticism, its imperial and aristocratic patronage and its service to the people made the city's monastic leaders (archimandrites) into

59 On the problem of the letters attributed to Nilus, see Averil Cameron, 'The authenticity of the letters of St. Nilus of Ancyra'.

60 Sozomen, *H.E.* 4.27.4.

61 For early monasticism in Constantinople see Caner, *Wandering, begging monks*, 191–9 and Gilbert Dagron, 'Les moines et la ville'.

62 *CTH* 16.3.1; see Caner, *Wandering, begging monks*, 199 for further references.

alternative centres of power competing with the bishops, something that John Chrysostom, Nestorius and Flavian all had to experience.

This competition for power, both in relation to the imperial family and other prominent patrons and in relation to the public at large, was no doubt an essential factor behind the four major conflicts between the bishops of Constantinople and monastic groups in the city in the period 400–51. A second unmistakable factor was the city's attraction for vagabonds and beggars, many of whom pretended to be monks – at least according to the official sources. Conflicts over interpretation of the gospel and its commands probably constituted a third factor, for the preaching of a radical exactitude (*akribeia*) among some monks was considered extremely dangerous to the church and its position in society. In the first conflict during the period, John Chrysostom's attempts to get control over the life of the monks of the city greatly contributed to his fall, in which the extremely powerful archimandrite Isaac took a leading role. In this, Isaac was joined by his imperial patrons, large sections of the public whose patron he was, and Theophilus the bishop of Alexandria, who provided ecclesiastical backing.<sup>63</sup>

The second clash came with the decision to expel from the city Alexander the Sleepless, whose earlier careers in Syria we have already described. In the early 420s, he had settled in an abandoned temple in the centre of the city. There he attracted monks both from outside the capital and from other monastic groups in the city. In his candid preaching, Alexander criticised all who did not live according to apostolic standards. His banishment from Constantinople in the mid 420s came as a joint action of the urban magistrates and the bishops.<sup>64</sup> Given that a council in Constantinople in 426 condemned Messalians, it is possible (though not self-evident) that he was denounced explicitly as a Messalian. But, as we have already seen, the relationship between Alexander's *akoimetoι* monks and the Euchites is unclear.

A third clash came in 428 when the archimandrites of the city turned against the new bishop, Nestorius. From his arrival in the city, Nestorius (himself a Syrian monk) set out to reform the church. He was especially keen to confine the monks to their monasteries, accusing them of unseemly behaviour in the streets and secret visits to the houses of the rich, and their abbots of not taking care of their flocks.<sup>65</sup> Nestorius' support for an academic Antiochene

<sup>63</sup> Our main source is Palladius, *Dialogue on the life of St John Chrysostom*.

<sup>64</sup> On this conflict see Caner, *Wandering, begging monks*, 126–57.

<sup>65</sup> The main sources for Nestorius' dealings with the monks are his own *Liber Heraclides* and the later 'Nestorian' *History of Barhadbeshabba*; see Cane, *Wandering, begging monks*, 212–23.

theological rejection of traditional piety – especially in regard to its understanding of Jesus Christ as God born by Mary – made his position even more difficult. Finally the emperor had to give in to the combined forces of the monks of the city and the bishop of Alexandria, supported by Rome. A final clash between Eutyches, a venerated old archimandrite, and Bishop Flavian (as well as his successor) in 450–1 finally led to a formal solution of the struggle for power by the promulgation of the fourth canon at the Council of Chalcedon. At that council, the new emperor decided to back the demand of the bishops to put all monks and monastic houses under their authority, with the explicit demand on the bishops to provide for their needs.

These conflicts between the bishops and the monks should not, however, give the impression that monasticism in Constantinople was very different from other places or less orthodox. Instead, they indicate the much more difficult position the bishop had in a city where there were many other sources of power and patronage, especially if he did not belong to the city itself (as, for example, John Chrysostom and Nestorius did not).

## Conclusions

In spite of the great differences between the various regions, due to social, political and ecclesiastical factors, there are some common features in the early development of monasticism in the East. First, there is a clear tendency towards communal life and coenobitic structures. The reasons for this are both internal and external. Internally, there was a need for an educational setting and common support. The *Sayings of the desert fathers* as well as the writings of Evagrius clearly describe the need for training (and the dangers of total solitude); they also emphasise the necessity of routines, which presupposes an overarching scheme of organisation to co-ordinate the lives of individual monks. Externally, there was the danger of violent attacks on scattered and isolated monastic houses, but there was also considerable pressure from bishops and secular authorities for monks to remain settled and orderly. By denouncing unwanted monastic groups as heretics and by legislating about ecclesiastical control, itinerant monastic groups were forced either to settle down or to accept exile. In various ways the ascetic groups in the cities, as well as the ascetic households, were transformed into monasteries. The ideas of total solitude as well as homelessness were given a coenobitic context, as in the examples of recluses inside monasteries and rules stressing total renunciation of ancestry and family. In monastic communities, the spiritual direction of the disciple by his master or the answers of the solitary monks to those seeking

advice were gathered and transmitted in growing collections of spiritual wisdom. In spite of the Pachomian rules' detailed character, the regulations by Shenoute and the different sets of rules by Basil, Eastern monasticism never became governed by rules in the way Western monasticism did, nor indeed did it become characterised by orders. Instead these collections, varying from one monastery to another, and including stories about the founders of the monastic communities, became decisive for the formation of the monks.

Second, the impact the monastic tradition made on society at large is clearly visible in imperial as well as ecclesiastical legislation. Beginning in the 370s, several imperial edicts attempt to circumscribe the monastic movement. Some edicts are directed against monks who are accused of serving rich people in order to lay hold of their fortunes,<sup>66</sup> others are directed against those who have left their homes and civil duties (in these cases, some of the people concerned are likely to have belonged to or joined the emerging monastic tradition).<sup>67</sup> Again, other edicts explicitly forbid monks from entering into and staying in the cities.<sup>68</sup> Monastic involvement in imperial affairs is, however, already visible in the conflicts between Constantine and Athanasius and in the various synods during the Arian Controversy. At the end of the fourth century Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria enlisted imperial force to expel a large section of the leading monks in Egypt when they were becoming too powerful, and in the fifth and sixth centuries clashes between groups of monks and imperial force were numerous, as seen especially in the context of imperial persecution of non-Chalcedonians. Although overshadowed by the Christological conflict, a major issue at the Council of Chalcedon was the authority of the bishops over all monastic institutions.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, imperial and aristocratic funding was an essential part of the success of many monastic establishments, not only in Palestine, but also in Constantinople, Asia Minor and Syria, where monasteries were part of the fortification of the border of the empire. In the sixth century, the funding of monasteries (such as St Catherine and Mar Saba by Justinian and Syrian monasteries by Theodora) contributed not only to the wealth of the monasteries but also to the preservation of early monastic literature and the development of monastic liturgical tradition.

<sup>66</sup> *CTh* 16.2.20 (issued 370).

<sup>67</sup> *CJ* 11.51.1 (issued 386) and *CJ* 11.52.1 (issued 393), both on *stabilitas loci*, *CTh* 14.18.1 (issued 382) and 14.14.1 (issued 397), both against beggars.

<sup>68</sup> *CTh* 16.3.1 (issued 390).

<sup>69</sup> Canons 4, 8, 23 and 24 all deal with problems concerning monks who act on their own. The most important decision is in canon 4, according to which no monastery might be established without the consent of the local bishop.

The impact of the monastic tradition on the life and theology of the Eastern church in these centuries can hardly be overestimated. Beginning already in the mid-fourth century monks were increasingly drawn into church administration and ordained bishops or made responsible for various affairs of the dioceses. Within fifty years, the episcopacy was well on its way to becoming the exclusive preserve of monks and, after 400, the majority of Eastern Christian authors, and almost all theologians, were monks. Early Greek monastic literature was quickly translated either from Coptic or Syriac into Greek or from Greek into Syriac, Coptic and Latin and added to ever growing collections. With the development of an elaborate structure for the prayer life of the monastic communities, the influence of monastic prayer upon the liturgical life of the cathedrals grew, and in places like Jerusalem the monks were more or less responsible for the entire liturgical life. Pilgrims who came to Egypt, Palestine and Syria did not only come to see holy places, but perhaps primarily to see the famous monks and their monastic communities. The strong emphasis on hospitality and care for the poor and sick resulted in making the monasteries of the fifth and sixth centuries into centres visited by all levels of society.

At a deeper level, the theological developments in the East also betray a strong impact of the monastic tradition. There are good reasons to view even the Christological interpretations of Cyril of Alexandria against a monastic background (especially in view of their emphasis on transformation), and the subsequent development of a neo-Cyrrillian or neo-Chalcedonian theology is clearly rooted in monastic tradition. Furthermore, the theological views of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and their immediate success in the early sixth century is to be understood against the backdrop of a monastic culture and a monastic theological tradition. Both Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus were not only monks, but were deeply indebted to monastic theology and early monastic authors such as Evagrius of Pontus and the anonymous author of the Macarian homilies.

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